

GREATER SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION IN MONTANA AND THE DAKOTAS

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

This briefing paper outlines the major ongoing efforts toward greater sage-grouse conservation in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota, beyond the specific measures developed as part of the BLM's project-planning processes.

ISSUES:

The BLM and its partners are working on resource management plan (RMP) revisions that will cover most of the BLM-managed sage-grouse habitat in the three states. The Montana/Dakotas organization views this as a prime opportunity to update our approaches to sage-grouse conservation. When updated, these RMPs will guide important on-the-ground decisions for habitat conservation and restoration.

The BLM continues to implement on-the-ground habitat improvement projects, including projects to reduce conifer encroachment and invasive/non-native species. The BLM also participates in three greater sage-grouse local working groups (LWGs) (Dillon, Miles City, and Glasgow) that were established under the final *Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage-grouse in Montana* (hereafter *Management Plan*), led by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP). North Dakota's plan is complete; South Dakota is refining its draft. The BLM also partners with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to fund a coordinator position to enhance the function of LWGs and to find new ways to achieve greater sage-grouse conservation across ownerships. The BLM anticipates working closely with NRCS on habitat conservation and restoration projects and will look for additional opportunities to expand this partnering effort.

Yearly lek monitoring and data sharing is a high priority for all offices. Data protocols have been developed with local FWP offices to facilitate information sharing, and the BLM coordinates inventory and monitoring efforts with FWP, industry, and non-governmental organizations. The BLM provides funding for various research projects related to greater sage-grouse, greater sage-grouse habitat, and the BLM's multiple-use management of public lands. These ongoing projects include studies on West Nile Virus, and research, inventory, and monitoring to identify important seasonal habitats, movements, and survival. The BLM has also supported recent studies that examine winter survival, the effects of coal bed natural gas (CBNG) development, and the relationship between West Nile Virus and natural and man-made water sources.

Regarding energy development, the BLM is currently working with researchers, industry representatives, and FWP to incorporate up-to-date greater sage-grouse conservation actions into its CBNG Supplemental EIS, which will influence Billings and Miles City field office projects. It will also help shape the final Miles City RMP and affect the lease nomination and sale process, and project analyses. The BLM has a close working relationship with FWP through the Miles City Energy Pilot Office.

In an effort to minimize habitat loss to wildland fire, the BLM also made habitat mapping for wildland fire suppression use a top priority in 2008.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Through the National Environmental Policy Act and planning processes, the BLM will determine an adaptive management approach that applies the best available science/information to ensure that the public lands continue to be available for the BLM's multiple uses while conserving greater sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat. These efforts are especially important in light of the upcoming re-evaluation by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service of its 2005 "not warranted" listing decision.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The director recognizes the BLM's role in sagebrush habitat management and greater sage-grouse conservation. As a good steward of the land, the BLM will continue to focus resources and efforts on conserving sagebrush and greater sage-grouse on BLM-managed lands. All these efforts will feed into future conservation and restoration opportunities under the Director's Healthy Lands emphasis.

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